

NEW STUDIES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY 15

Series editor: D. A. Carson

Dominion and dynasty

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY
OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

Stephen G. Dempster



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Contents

Series preface	9
Author's preface	11
INTRODUCTION	
1 A book or a ragbag: a literary approach to Old Testament theology	15
Old Testament theology: the Bible through different eyes	15
An 'appropriate reading' of the biblical text	16
The Old Testament: texts or Text	20
The importance of the literary approach to the Text	24
Not losing sight of the forest	26
Explicit signals of textual coherence	30
The present study: a literary approach and biblical theology	36
Biblical theology, Tanakh structure and the emergence of a literary approach	37
Canonization and contextualization	41
2 The beginning, middle and ending of the Tanakh: a preview of the storyline (Adam to David)	45
Plan, purpose, plot	45
Dominion, dynasty and David in Genesis and Chronicles	47
The middle of the Tanakh	49
I DOMINION LOST: THE RISE AND FALL OF ISRAEL	
3 The narrative storyline begins (Genesis)	55
'These are the generations of . . .'	55
The goal of creation	56
The garden of Eden	62

The fall	66
Genealogical and geographical hope	68
Creation and covenant	72
Shem, the Table of Nations and the tower of Babel	73
The genealogy of Shem and the call of Abram: land, descendants, universal blessing	75
The divine answer to the human plight	77
The Abram story: geography and genealogy	77
The Jacob story: the merging of geography and genealogy	86
The Joseph story and universal blessing	88
4 The narrative storyline continues (Exodus to Deuteronomy)	93
Exodus: multiplication, oppression, liberation	93
Leviticus: sacrifice and holiness	107
Numbers: journey to hell and back	110
Deuteronomy: at the border of Canaan	117
5 The narrative storyline continues: the Former Prophets (Joshua to Kings)	125
The Prophets	125
The Former Prophets: the dead end of exile	125
Joshua: occupation and settlement	126
Judges: the darkness settles	130
Samuel: the promise of a king	134
Kings: the dead end of exile	147
II RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT: A STUMP AND A SHOOT	
6 Suspension of the storyline – poetic commentary begins: the Latter Prophets (Jeremiah to the Twelve)	159
The Latter Prophets	159
Jeremiah: demolition and reconstruction	159
Ezekiel: the life-giving divine presence	167
Isaiah: the shoot from Jesse's stump	172
The Twelve: the impending eschaton	182
Summary of the prophetic commentary	187
7 Poetic commentary continues: the Writings (Ruth to Lamentations)	191
Ruth: exile, return and David	191

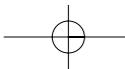
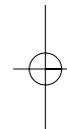
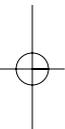
The Psalms: David, David and David	194
The wisdom literature: to master the world	202
Job: the moral government of the universe	202
Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs: a Solomonic stamp	206
Lamentations: curse and the mercies	208

III DOMINION REGAINED: THE FALL AND RISE OF ISRAEL

8 Ending of poetic commentary and resumption of narrative storyline (Daniel to Chronicles)	213
Daniel: the coming kingdom	213
Esther: history with an Israelite shape	221
Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles: the end and the beginning	223

CONCLUSION

9 Typology and New Testament reflections	231
Bibliography	235
Index of ancient sources	251
Index of modern authors	252
Index of Scripture references	255



Series preface

New Studies in Biblical Theology is a series of monographs that address key issues in the discipline of biblical theology. Contributions to the series focus on one or more of three areas: 1. the nature and status of biblical theology, including its relations with other disciplines (e.g. historical theology, exegesis, systematic theology, historical criticism, narrative theology); 2. the articulation and exposition of the structure of thought of a particular biblical writer or corpus; and 3. the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora.

Above all, these monographs are creative attempts to help thinking Christians understand their Bibles better. The series aims simultaneously to instruct and to edify, to interact with the current literature, and to point the way ahead. In God's universe, mind and heart should not be divorced: in this series we will try not to separate what God has joined together. While the notes interact with the best of the scholarly literature, the text is uncluttered with untranslated Greek and Hebrew, and tries to avoid too much technical jargon. The volumes are written within the framework of confessional evangelicalism, but there is always an attempt at thoughtful engagement with the sweep of the relevant literature.

The Christian teacher or preacher who has attempted to give an overview of the Old Testament, whether in a local church or in a college or seminary setting, knows how difficult it is to organize the material in a way that is fair to each part, faithful to the historical setting and literary genre of each part, and yet a component of the Christian canon. Here Dr Stephen Dempster is a fresh and sure-footed guide. He would be the first to acknowledge, of course, that one could organize the documents of the Hebrew canon a little differently. Nevertheless, his reading of the storyline of the Old Testament is fresh, provocative and helpful – and doubtless will prove to be the stuff of many sermons and lectures. His closing chapter points to some of the links that bind the Old and the New Testaments

DOMINION AND DYNASTY

together, an obviously urgent goal for the Christian preacher and teacher. For we hold that we should ultimately be striving for what the Germans call *eine gesamtbiblische Theologie*, a genuinely *biblical* theology, a 'whole-Bible theology' (as opposed to a merely Old Testament or New Testament theology). In a time and setting in western culture when there are far more bitty and picky thinkers around than well-informed 'big-picture' theologians, Dr Dempster's volume is an important corrective.

D. A. Carson
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Author's preface

I have been studying the Old Testament for a long time, but, like many scholars, I have not been able to see the forest for the trees. A sabbatical in 1993 prompted me to begin reading the Hebrew Bible looking not for details but for its general contours. That new perspective resulted in some studies on the Hebrew Canon, which sought to explore whether the text itself provided some overall textual structure and interpretive strategy (1997; 2001). This led to another paper – a first venture into the field of biblical theology – given at a conference held at Wheaton College in 2000: 'Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect'. This book represents a further development of that essay. It is far from complete, but I think it points the way forward and is suggestive for further research.

Along the way colleagues and friends have provided much advice and help. The editor of this series, Don Carson, has given me needed encouragement and valuable criticism. I would like to thank him and Philip Duce, Theological Books Editor at IVP, who has been extremely patient and helpful. Both Philip and Don believed in this project and I thank them for it. I have benefited a great deal from Peter Gentry's expertise in the area of linguistics and theology; Malcolm Elliott-Hogg's critical eye; Doug and Eileen Mantz's editing skills; Rick Thomas's listening ear and encouraging words; John Sailhamer's and Dan Goodwin's quiet encouragement; and the strength drawn from the prayers of John Holt, Brent Hudson, Bruce Finley and Dave Hatt. I would thank previous mentors, such as the late Ray Dillard, Palmer Robertson, Paul Dion, John Revell and John Wevers, for all the help and tools they have given me along the way. I owe the most to my father and mother, from whom I first learned 'the old, old Story'.

I would like to thank our children for their patience and endurance these last few years: Jessica, Joanna, Nathan, Michael, Holly and Victoria. I have been blessed beyond all measure by your presence.

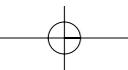
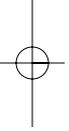
DOMINION AND DYNASTY

I would like to thank God for his strength and grace in helping me see this project to its end, which is really only a beginning.

I would dedicate this book to my wife, Yehudit. Thanks for everything! *kī yôdē'a kol ša'ar 'ammī kī 'ēšet ḥayîl 'att* (Ruth 3:11).

Stephen G. Dempster

Introduction



Chapter One

A book or a ragbag: a literary approach to Old Testament theology

Old Testament theology: the Bible through different eyes

Biblical theology has often been regarded as a discipline that avoids the subjectivity of other theological disciplines, since its goal is to discover the Bible's own distinctive theology.¹ It seems a far more manageable task – although a naïvely modernist one – to distinguish what the text meant from what the text means (Stendahl 1962).² Yet the fact remains that, of the approximately sixty biblical theologies written during the last century, there are almost as many theologies as there are theologians (Lemcio 1997: 361).³ The 'Bible's own theology' has turned out to be the interpreters' own theologies. To be sure, different interpretive lenses used by different theologians have ensured this result. Diachronic, historical lenses foreground the chronological sequence of the divine saving events in the biblical text but background the ongoing providential divine activity expressed, for instance, in the wisdom literature and various psalms. Systematic lenses view the textual material through topical categories borrowed from dogmatic theology, such as God, humanity and salvation. Thematic lenses that often highlight indigenous biblical concepts, whether single or multiple, often overlook other central themes. Existential lenses are almost like mirrors, reflecting back to interpreters their own concerns. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that, even when interpreters use the same lenses, different

¹ From the beginning this seems to be the case (Gabler 1787). Modern scholars tend to accept this basic distinction. See e.g. Stendahl 1962. Gerhard Ebeling formulates the difference between biblical theology and systematic theology as the theology contained in the Bible versus theology conforming to the Bible.

² For a recent valiant defence of this position see Barr 1999: 188–208.

³ Rolf Rendtorff (1997: 19) mentions sixty Old Testament theologies produced in the twentieth century alone. The latest that I have been able to read is that of H. Spieckermann (2000).

DOMINION AND DYNASTY

theologies might result.⁴ As Westermann aptly puts the matter, 'The story which the Old Testament itself requires one to tell looks very different to different investigators' (1963: 11).

Although this observation could lead to a version of postmodern cynicism, this conclusion is unnecessary. Theologians sailing in the waters of contemporary western culture have to avoid two opposite errors: they have to navigate between the Scylla of modernism and the Charybdis of postmodernism. The error of modernism is 'objectivism', that is, the idea that individual subjects can attain the entire, value-free, truth when examining an object – they can see it as it really is; while the error of postmodernism is 'subjectivism', the idea that, because observers are never value-free or objective, they see the object according to their subjective perspective – they see it not as it is but as they are (and therefore never really see it). A truly Judeo-Christian epistemology will navigate between these extremes of radical objectivism and radical subjectivism. Human beings can know truth because it is revealed, but it is always accommodated to their understanding and always filtered through their own particular context. Factors of culture, place, time, society, education, experience and the effects of sin on the mind colour the truth. Paul remarks in his first letter to the Corinthian church that Christian believers see through a glass darkly in the present life. His observation illustrates the truths of both modernism and postmodernism held in tension, while avoiding their errors: we *see* (modernism) through a *glass darkly* (postmodernism).⁵

An 'appropriate reading' of the biblical text

One of the insights of postmodernism is that each human being looks at the world through a particular interpretive lens. In some ways the resulting variety of perspectives is simply part of the human condition. Each human being views reality from a particular vantage point. Far from hindering the interpretive process, the diversity of perspectives can contribute to a better understanding, as any reading of the synoptic Gospels shows. All true learning takes place in community, where there is give and take, affirmation and correction.⁶ It is often in

⁴ For the various perspectives see e.g. Vogels 1998.

⁵ 1 Cor. 13:12. For instructive results on the different interpretations generated by modernist and postmodernist readings see Wright 1992: 6–10. Among other Christian scholars, Wright (1992: 33–120) develops a programmatic epistemology based on Christian presuppositions, which he terms 'critical realism'.

⁶ See Fowl & Jones 1991 for the importance of interpretation within the context of community.

A LITERARY APPROACH TO OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

this context that an interpreter will become aware of 'blind spots'. Nevertheless, this is not to say, with some postmodernists, that all readings of a text are equally valid and hence equally invalid. Brueggeman, an important Old Testament theologian, comes dangerously close to this when he seems to celebrate all perspectives as legitimate (1997a: 4–8). This inevitably leads to hermeneutical solipsism, which he certainly would not wish to endorse.⁷ This situation is like the interpretive equivalent of that famous passage from Judges: there was no king (no true reading) in Israel and everyone read what was right in his own eyes.⁸

Anderson's perspective provides a corrective to such hermeneutical anarchy. While acknowledging the limitations of the human condition, he makes the point that 'there surely is an appropriate reading of a text – one that is faithful to its genre and structure' (1986: 55; cf. Stuhlmacher 1995: 1, 64, 80).

To illustrate this point with an extreme case, a few decades ago an individual proposed that aspects of the Old Testament, as well as other mysterious phenomena in the world, could be elucidated if one accepted the view that long ago the world had been visited by aliens from outer space (von Däniken 1968). This explains why, for example, Uzzah was struck down when he touched the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sam. 6). He was electrocuted by a device invented by the aliens, who, of course, had advanced knowledge of such things as electricity. Recently, many similar books have appeared in the popular culture, one claiming in particular that the exodus tabernacle and the temple of Solomon with the Ark of the Covenant were microwave transceivers communicating with orbiting spaceships (Jones 2001). The reason these particular interpretations of the Bible do not win much of a following among biblical scholars is obvious. They impose 'alien' frameworks upon the Old Testament data. They surely are not 'an

⁷ Brueggeman seems to want to have it both ways. See his strictures (1997b: 63 n. 7) against the complete abdication to postmodernism by some scholars (e.g. Clines 1995), while he himself questions whether interpretations can truly be illegitimate or not (1997b: 100–102). Yet, ironically, he is constantly evaluating readings of the Old Testament as 'massively reductionist' or 'a misreading of the text' (1997b: 92, 95). Although Clines has sold out to postmodernism, it is ironic that everyone has reached this conclusion from his writing. Perhaps his writing – and all writing – assumes what it denies. One should also note Dentan's (1963: 90) comments before the rise of postmodernism about Otto Eissfeldt's subjective programme for biblical theology, i.e. that 'there will be as many Old Testament theologies as there are creeds or churches': 'This point of view seems to involve a kind of solipsistic irrationalism which precludes intellectual discussion.'

⁸ Judg. 21:25. Cf. Brueggeman 1997b: xv–xvi, 61–64.

DOMINION AND DYNASTY

appropriate reading' of the text, 'one that is faithful to its genre and structure'. Rather, the text has been made to a fit a hermeneutical bed that makes its ancient Procrustean equivalent look quite modest.

Admittedly, these examples are extreme, but the line between the alien and normal is becoming blurred. One scholar has recently argued that Paul affirms homosexuality in Romans 1:18–24 (Hornsby 2001), and another that the fall story is about the rise of humanity rather than its descent (Carmichael 1992).

To be sure, these cases illustrate invalid readings of the biblical text, but less excessive examples may be more dangerous because their biases are not so obvious and often they do make a significant contribution to understanding the text. When, for example, the Old Testament is read through Marxist spectacles, elements are foregrounded that would not be emphasized when read through capitalist glasses, and *vice versa*.⁹ Is it an accident that liberation theology focuses on the exodus as a paradigmatic event of salvation? Probably not. Does the legacy of Adam Smith have anything to say about wealthy western Protestantism's strange silence regarding the Old Testament condemnation of usury during the last two centuries? It probably does. The point, however, is that both sides need to hear each other and both as much as possible should strive for a reading of the text that is appropriate to its genre and structure.

This is intuitively recognized in other areas. It is not appropriate for a brain surgeon to use the tools of a carpenter, or *vice versa*. Each must use tools that 'fit' his or her profession. A famous biblical scholar made a similar point about Old Testament students: "The commentator who seeks to comment on a religious book without at the same time being a religious man" would be like an unmusical historian of music, and it is certain that the "one for whom religion is a phenomenon of only pathological interest will not be in any position to understand its history either".¹⁰

Consequently, the function of a particular text should inform interpreters, so much so that they begin to use the lens the text itself provides. If the Bible is approached as a political tract, a textbook of

⁹ Note how this affects the interpretation of Leviticus 25. For the last few centuries many western commentaries have viewed it as utopian and unpractical, the work of idealists of the postexilic period. 'These scholars, apparently influenced by the western capitalistic structure of society, had no idea of the practicability of other economic and social structures' (van Selms 1976: 497). Consequently, Leviticus 25 is not taken seriously.

¹⁰ Herman Gunkel as cited by Reventlow (1985: 8). See also the important observations by Dentan (1963: 114–117).

A LITERARY APPROACH TO OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

knowledge, a dictionary of ethics, a secret code or a cipher for understanding UFOs, then surely its meaning will be distorted. Interpreters are using inappropriate tools. As Seitz (1998: 81–82) remarks, ‘No matter how much the golfer with a sand wedge or cleated shoes wants to play squash, the squash court expects something else: rubber soled shoes, a squash racket, and a player who has come to play squash.’ Or, to shift the metaphor once again, a lens appropriate for seeing the text must be used.

How is such a lens acquired? One of the ways is through constant exposure to the text: reading and rereading. Long (1994: 34) writes about a particular historian who immersed himself in the texts of a period so much that his mind absorbed the categories and values of that period. It is similar with biblical interpretation. Although C. S. Lewis was not primarily a biblical scholar, his literary training helped him to write an influential study of the Psalms. He advised that, in the biblical text,

The human quality of the raw materials shows through. Naïvety, error, contradiction, even (as in the cursing Psalms) wickedness are not removed. The total result is not ‘the Word of God’ in the sense that every passage, in itself, gives impeccable science or history. It carries the Word of God; and we (under grace, with attention to tradition and to interpreters wiser than ourselves, and with the use of such intelligence and learning as we may have) receive that word from it not by using it as an encyclopedia or an encyclical but by steeping ourselves in its tone or temper and so learning its overall message (1961: 94).¹¹

It is by ‘steeping ourselves in its tone or temper’ that readers learn ‘its overall message’. Reading and rereading. By engaging in this activity we become familiar with the contours of the text, its poetic detail, its texture, its wordplays and distinctive logic, its overall shape and design. It is much the same with explorers who make a map of a new territory. They must take their bearings, surveying the plains, valleys, hills – get to know the terrain as a territory. After this initial assessment the task is far from over. That terrain must be painstakingly

¹¹ Lewis’s little book itself repays rereading. For this particular quotation I am indebted to Rodney Whitacre (1991). While I agree with the literary point that Lewis makes, theologically he is on questionable ground. The canon of Scripture does not just carry the word of God; it is the divine word.

DOMINION AND DYNASTY

examined again and again – read and reread – in order to make the most accurate map. For literary topography the task is similar. This is what is meant by the hermeneutical rule of the analogy of faith. The interpreter must understand individual passages in the light of the whole text, and the whole can be known only by repeated readings of its individual parts.¹²

The Old Testament: texts or Text

Although at first sight the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible is a text with a cover, a front page and a closing page, with 1,500 or so pages in between,¹³ it needs to be remembered that for most of its early life it was never a book in this technical sense. It was a collection of books – scrolls, to be exact,¹⁴ kept together in an archive or library at a sacred place. Barr (1983) and Barton (1985) emphasize this, pointing out that unity was something that seems ‘read in’ to the text rather than ‘read out’, since the idea of the Bible being a ‘Book’, in the modern sense of a self-contained physical unity, with a definite beginning, fixed sequence and specific ending, is a retrojection from a later time. States Barr:

... the books were separate individual scrolls. A ‘Bible’ was not a volume one could hold in a hand but a cupboard or chest with pigeonholes or a room or cave with a lot of individual scrolls. The boundary between what was scripture and what were other holy books was thus more difficult to indicate, and so was the order of the books and the organization (if any) of the canon (1983: 57).¹⁵

Thus Barr believes that there can be the study of individual books or scrolls or perhaps sequences of scrolls (e.g. the Pentateuch), but beyond this it becomes problematic. There are other ways, however, to compensate for the lack of physical unity. Clearly, this is the case, as Barr admits, for the Pentateuch. The finished Text had no physical unity, since there was no scroll large enough to contain it. Consequently, it

¹² See the insightful comments of Silva (1987: 93–94).

¹³ The Hebrew Bible on my desk, for example, the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, is 1,574 pages in length.

¹⁴ The book or codex was not invented until the first century of the Common Era and was not widely used until much later. See Roberts & Skeat 1954.

¹⁵ For similar points about the irrelevance of sequence see Barton 1985: 83–91; Barton 1997; Swanson 1970: 321; A. Jeffery 1952: 139; Ryle 1898: 238.

A LITERARY APPROACH TO OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

was written on five separate scrolls. Yet not even the most radical literary critic would dare to claim that the correct sequence of scrolls was unimportant for interpretation, and that the whole – the Text – was not greater than the sum of its five parts – the texts. Linguistic, stylistic and thematic devices ensured that conceptual unity was established, even if technological limitations precluded physical unity.

Theoretically, physical division does not necessarily imply conceptual disunity, as a glance at a multi-volume work on any modern library shelf will show. Similarly, in ancient Israel, the physical separation of texts did not imply that there was not a Text of which they comprised parts. The deposit of separate volumes together in one archive was already one means to indicate their conceptual unity. In Mesopotamia, for example, the *Creation Epic* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* had prehistories as oral Texts before they were reduced to writing. When they were inscribed on the physical medium of clay, this technological limitation required the physical separation of these oral and conceptual ‘books’. In the case of the *Creation Epic*, seven clay tablets were used; in the instance of *Gilgamesh*, twelve. Sarna (1971) and Hallo (1991) have argued that the important conceptual order in these Texts was maintained by storing them in a fixed sequence on the equivalent of ‘shelves’ in ancient archives. A physical unity was created to maintain the conceptual unity in much the same way that multi-volume works are stored in a specific order on the same library shelf in a modern library.¹⁶

When the canon was finalized, a similar type of physical unity was created. Canonical books were distinguished from other non-canonical works and grouped separately; their order was probably maintained by simple physical juxtaposition. At the least, it is certain that the Hebrew Bible, despite being composed of many texts, is not for that reason precluded from being a Text.

Although physical division does not necessitate conceptual disunity, many believe that it is difficult to see any literary and thematic unity that bind the many texts together into one Text. In other words, physical unity does not guarantee conceptual unity. These texts were produced by many different authors over a period of almost a millennium, and comprised a virtual kaleidoscope of genres. In Frye’s words:

¹⁶ Herodotus’s lengthy *Histories* is an example in which the technological restriction of the roll required the physical separation of major units or ‘books’, but there is no question but that it is one conceptual and literary unity, although sometimes it is difficult to see the forest for the trees. See the author’s comments at various places within the work: 1:1; 2:122–123; 3:60–62; 4:85–86.

DOMINION AND DYNASTY

The Bible is first of all – to use a word no less accurate for being a fashionable term – a mosaic: a pattern of commandments, aphorisms, proverbs, parables, riddles, pericopes, parallel couplets, formulaic phrases, folk tales, oracles, epiphanies, *Gattungen*, *Logia*, bits of occasional verse, marginal glosses, legends, snippets from historical documents, laws, letter sermons, hymns, ecstatic visions, rituals, fables, genealogical lists and so on almost indefinitely (1983: 206).

But, as Frye has also recognized, diversity does not preclude unity, nor does unity imply uniformity. The different colours of the rainbow create stunning beauty. Similarly, an author may use a mosaic of different genres and sources to create a literary rainbow. An editor or editorial team can select information, arrange it, splice it, modify it, add to it and subtract from it, revising it not only for individual texts but for larger textual collections or groupings. Even the simple inclusion of an individual text within a sequence of texts is an editorial decision that forces the reader to read the individual text in a new way – as part of a whole.

There is no question that the Hebrew Bible, or Tanakh, as it has come down to believing communities, was viewed as a unity. The diverse literary collection was viewed as a whole for theological reasons. While having many authors, it was also believed to have one. But the question remains: is this a unity in any literary sense or is it artificially imposed? Is the result simply a hotchpotch of old religious traditions (at worst) or an anthology of ancient literature (at best)?

The facts indicate conceptual unity. This will be dealt with more extensively later, but it needs to be stated that, despite the literary heterogeneity, there is at the same time a remarkable structural homogeneity, for this vast variety of genres is set within books, which are placed within an extraordinary narrative outline commencing with creation and ending with the exile and return of the Jewish people. The storyline begins with creation and moves to the exile of Judah in Babylon, from Genesis to 2 Kings; then the narrative is interrupted by poetic texts – largely prophecy, psalms, and wisdom literature – before being resumed with Israel back in Babylon in the book of Daniel, moving on to the return of the exiles to Judah and concluding with a narrative summation of the entire history of Israel from creation to the exile in the books of Chronicles. This amazing diversity of texts is set within a comprehensive narrative framework, which provides an overarching literary and historical context. Thus the

A LITERARY APPROACH TO OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

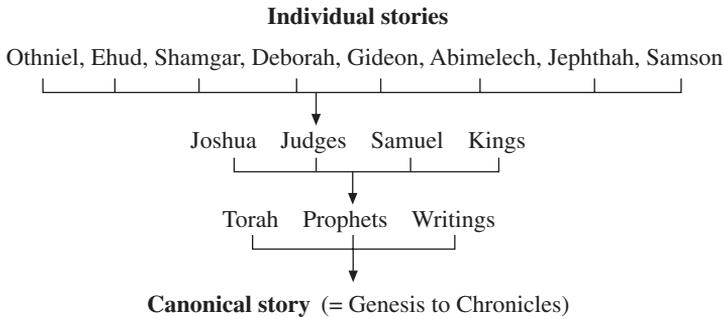


Figure 1.1. Stories within the Story.

many shorter texts together contribute to this larger textual framework and find their meaning and significance within it.

For example, the individual hero stories in the book of Judges have their individual 'local' meaning as examples of God's salvation for each of the various tribes at particular times. But they are now positioned within a larger national Story (the book of Judges), which itself is part of a larger Story (the Former Prophets), which in turn is part of a universal Story (Genesis to Chronicles). This can be illustrated as in figure 1.1.

The larger literary context of the Tanakh has significant hermeneutical implications. For example, it begins with Genesis rather than with Exodus, signifying that Israel's national history is subordinated to that of world history. Hermeneutically, this means that the birth of Israel as a nation and its *raison d'être* are set within God's larger purposes for the world and for creation. To begin with Genesis rather than with Psalms provides a historical context by which Israel's praise can be understood. To begin with the Adam in Chronicles rather than with the Adam in Genesis would omit important background information necessary to understanding the place of David in the former book. The monotonous refrain at the end of the Judges that 'there was no king in Israel. Everyone did as was right in his own eyes' (Judg. 21:25) supplies the appropriate context for interpreting the rise of kingship in the subsequent book of Samuel. Although the book of Ruth can be understood as a romantic short story emphasizing 'the law of kindness which transcends national boundaries and makes all men kin',¹⁷ its genealogical conclusion anchors it firmly into the

¹⁷ Israel Bettan as cited in Harvey 1962: 133.

DOMINION AND DYNASTY

overarching historical and literary context of the Bible and its position before the Psalms reinforces its function. Moreover, the poetic literature, which breaks the main line of narrative from Genesis through Kings, provides significant theological commentary before the narrative is resumed again in the book of Daniel. To read some of this commentary, such as the prophets, in isolation from the larger Text is inevitably to distort its message as one of doom and gloom, or to typecast the prophets as preachers of repentance. To read them in their literary context is to see that they reflect on the past – the experience of the exile as judgment (the cutting down of the tree to a stump) while looking forward to the future and its possibilities (the shoot that springs up from the stump) (Is. 6:13; 11:1).

The importance of the literary approach to the Text

The act of reading and hearing was important for the Bible's first audiences. Consequently, it is imperative that its audiences today pay attention to the act of reading and rereading its texts so that 'by steeping themselves in its tone or temper and so learning its overall message' they come to understand the Text. As far back as 1965 Good (1981: 9) was pleading for a more literary approach to Scripture: 'We have been so eager to *interpret* the Bible that we have sometimes forgotten to *read* it, to read it in the same way that we read *The Divine Comedy*, for example, or *Othello*, or *The Waste Land*.' The biblical books, by virtue of their canonical unity and by virtue of their genre as literature, require a literary perspective.

This is not to ignore the fact that the Bible is Scripture and not 'mere' literature. As scholars such as Childs (1979) and Kugel (1981) have indicated, the Bible is a sacred text and demands both a listening ear and an obedient heart. This religious dimension puts it in a class by itself, apart from books like *The Divine Comedy*. It is, after all, *God's Word*. In T. S. Eliot's words, 'the Bible has had a literary influence upon English literature not because it has been considered as literature, but because it has been considered the report of the Word of God' (1975: 98).

While it is true that the Bible 'was never received as sacred scripture because of its literary merit' (Carroll 1993: 89), ignorance of its literary features impedes understanding. This is part of the problem with fundamentalism, whether on the theological right or the theological left; the text is simply used and not studied. It is a one-

A LITERARY APPROACH TO OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

dimensional text. On the one hand, it is a thoroughly spiritual document containing 'Holy Ghost' language and offering a repository of insights that anticipate developments, for example, in the sciences. On the other hand, it is a thoroughly human creation that speaks to the struggle and evolution of the human spirit, and can be used to endorse the latest cultural fad by focusing on that part of the text that happens to conform to the contemporary *Zeitgeist*, while discarding or 'neutralizing' its less palatable parts. In both views there is no appreciation of the text as a literary whole, a redemptive story that aims at the restoration of a lost destiny for the human race and creation.¹⁸ An ideological agenda drives the readings. Within the Text, there certainly are texts that represent less than ideal values, but then, as Genesis 3 – 11 reveals, the world is less than ideal and sometimes radical measures are required. But it is a sense of the whole that keeps such texts in perspective.¹⁹ There are such things as human depravity and divine judgment, but there is also saving grace. Or the tragic elements are put in the narrative context of an ultimate Comedy. Finally, as the Bible is studied more and more from a literary point of view, there has been a great appreciation for the narrative and poetic art of its authors. Just as a lack of awareness of an author's craft deprives the reader of meaning, so an awareness of it enhances the meaning. T. S. Eliot objected not to the study of the Bible as literature but to the study of it *solely* as literature.²⁰

The inescapable fact is that the Bible is also God's *Word*; that is, it is literature and must be first understood before its message can be heeded. In the words of Rabbi Ishmael, 'The Torah uses language as human beings do.'²¹ In other words, while the Bible may be God's Word, it is not an esoteric 'heavenly language', but simply a message expressed in ordinary, human speech. Before the message can be obeyed, it must be first heard in the same way that ordinary speech is heard, with attention being paid to the rules of syntax, form and structure. It must be read and reread. Alter, a leading literary critic, makes a similar point:

¹⁸ See e.g. Frei 1974 for a compelling account of the loss of this perspective.

¹⁹ This is the major flaw in analyses like those of Carroll (1993) and Clines (1995).

²⁰ Note his comments when discussing the enjoyment of religious literature: 'While I acknowledge the legitimacy of this enjoyment, I am more acutely aware of its abuse. The persons who enjoy these writings *solely* because of their literary merits are essentially parasites' (1975: 98, emphasis mine). See also Silva 1987: 9–10. For a weak defence of the position Eliot criticizes see D. Robertson (1976: 548), who believes that the literary study of the Bible is 'the beginning and ending of scholarly endeavor'.

²¹ *Sanhedrin* 64b. For this quotation I am indebted to Berlin (1982: 324).

DOMINION AND DYNASTY

Subsequent religious tradition has by and large encouraged us to take the Bible seriously rather than to enjoy it, but the paradoxical truth of the matter may well be that by learning to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories, we shall come to see what they mean to tell us about God, man and the perilously momentous realm of history (1981: 189).

Auerbach, a pioneering literary critic, was able to see more clearly than most the religious claim of the Bible, precisely as a result of his study. In his classic essay on the difference between Hebrew and classical Greek literature he reaches the following conclusion:

The Bible's claim to truth is not only far more urgent than Homer's, it is tyrannical – it excludes all other claims. The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality – it insists that it is the only real world, is destined for autocracy ... The Scripture stories do not, like Homer's, court our favour, they do not flatter us so that they may please and enchant us – they seek to subject us and if we refuse we are rebels (1953: 14–15).

Auerbach's insight comes as a result of his literary study. It is because the Bible is sacred literature that readers should be serious about enjoying it, learning to understand it as literature. Since it is not 'mere' literature, its comprehension is imperative. For believers the interpretive task is not only validated; it is sanctified.²²

A linguistic sensitivity to the rich diversity of genres found within the Bible and their hermeneutical implications is extremely important. A parable should not be read like the narration of an historical event, a poem in the Psalms like a chronicle from Kings, a vision in Daniel as a literal story. Moreover, what drives the literary approach is the need to get not just the little texts right but also the big Text, or what C. S. Lewis called 'the overall message'.

Not losing sight of the forest

This leads to the question already raised, whether the Bible is truly a Text in this sense rather than an interesting, eclectic collection of

²² The older commentators understood this. Sir Edwyn Hoskyns, the eminent New Testament critic of a previous generation, was reputed to have frequently said, 'Bury yourself in a lexicon and arise in the presence of God.' For an evaluation of Hoskyns's contribution to biblical theology see Fuller 1985.

A LITERARY APPROACH TO OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

ancient texts. Such an 'anthology' would contain no storyline, coherence or unity – and, in the judgment of many, any unity that might exist would be strictly artificial. On such a view the Text is a literary and historical accident resulting from a 'political' decision.

This viewpoint is an important one for the literary critic, since it contradicts the reading experience of generations of believers in the synagogue and church, who have on the one hand understood the text as a unity but on the other have often lost sight of the overall message of the Text (the forest) because of all the little texts (the trees). One of the constant problems in the history of interpretation has been the failure to grasp the whole. Jesus criticized religious leaders for forgetting mercy, justice and faith – the weightier matters of the law – while concentrating on minor matters such as tithing the mint, dill and cumin.²³ Such instruction assumes knowledge of the big picture in which the various laws can be seen in relation to each other and their relative priority distinguished. In his dealing with the question of divorce, Jesus puts the small text of Mosaic legislation in Deuteronomy 24 in the context of the big Text of the biblical story, which begins at the beginning, with the first union of the male and female (Gen. 1 – 2).²⁴ Consequently, the divorce law of Deuteronomy is seen in a negative rather than a positive light – a sad commentary on the way things were in a fallen world in Israelite society. There is thus a theological imperative for believers to view texts in the more holistic framework of the Text.

Yet the fact remains that this is a difficult task. In the vast diversity of biblical literature it is not easy to see the unity of the Text.²⁵ Indeed, many biblical scholars have concluded that literary unity is an illusion, it being impossible to see any one Text in a virtual collage of texts, any overarching Macronarrative in a plethora of micro-narratives:

It is neither possible nor desirable to find a unity in the literary witness. The proof of that is the fact that no one has succeeded in capturing the alleged unity. The great variety of the literature, which practically everyone admits, prevents any unity

²³ Matt. 23:23.

²⁴ Matt. 19:1–12.

²⁵ 'The Old Testament at first overwhelms the reader with diversity. There is prose and poetry, wisdom and prophecy, love poems and poetry that expressed anger. It is easy to miss the overall story of the Old Testament in the maze of individual stories.' Ryken & Longman 1993: 102–103.

DOMINION AND DYNASTY

worthy of the name. One cannot expect a unity from a literature that was composed of oral and written traditions over a period of a thousand years (Murphy 2000: 82–83).

At first sight this conclusion seems to result from looking objectively at the literary character of the Bible, but in my judgment it is the consequence not only of getting lost in the massive variety of literary material which is the Bible, but also and particularly of the hermeneutical myopia of the last few centuries of biblical scholarship, which has used presuppositions that magnify the texts and minimize the Text. One of the philosophical assumptions that has produced this situation has been a diminution in the belief that the Bible is the Word of God: to expect authorial unity is simply too much to ask and must be given up as an outmoded view from a precritical era.²⁶ This particular theological judgment has gone hand in hand with an enchantment with the minute details of the biblical text rather than with its more global features, which *ipso facto* cannot exist.²⁷ The concern for studying smaller and smaller sections of the biblical text and the increasing specialization of scholars studying the minutiae of philology and morphology have resulted in a loss of perspective. To use an analogy from the field of photography, if one is constantly using the zoom lens on a piece of sculpture such as Mount Rushmore, one will note the worn surface of some rocks and the sedimentary contours of others. But unless one is able to step back with a wide-angle lens and take in 'the big picture', the point of it all has been lost.²⁸

²⁶ Marks (1987: 207) describes this alternative in scholarly prose as 'the supreme fiction of a divine intentionality or spirit, embracing incompatibles and transmuting the accidents of juxtaposition into a unique plenum'.

²⁷ The cause has largely been the progressive secularization of biblical studies. A belief in divine authorial unity, however, need not mean that one retains a sense of the whole: it may mean a captivation with the inspired details – even with the letters and vowel points of the Hebrew text! Nevertheless, the loss of the idea of the divine author in the modern period has surely resulted in an ever-increasing stress on the diversity of Scripture, the bracketing out of such larger questions by stressing a zoom-lens approach to the text (atomization) and a concern for the human origins of the texts and institutions that produced the texts (geneticism), as well as a commensurate loss of the ability to hear the voice of the divine author in the text. These concerns are all mentioned by R. C. Dentan in his classic programmatic study on Old Testament theology, but he does not see the obvious – the loss of any concept of author. For example, he considers the 'excessive atomism of much modern biblical study' to be the reason for the loss of the Bible as a source for the cultivation of personal piety. But that atomism is the symptom of a disease, not its cause. See Dentan 1963: 104. Postmodernism's death of the author is the logical outcome. See D. L. Jeffrey 1996 for an account of this phenomenon and a Christian response.

²⁸ I am indebted to Jay Wells for this analogy.

A LITERARY APPROACH TO OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

There is no question that the rise of historical criticism, with its attention to the zoom-lens features of the text (setting, historical context, grammatical features, philology, etc.) has coincided with a loss of a wide-angle-lens perspective. Indeed, historical criticism has contributed to a fragmented understanding of the text, so that any unity is an illusion. For example, many scholars continue to see a conflation of two separate sources in the biblical story of the flood (Gen. 6 – 9). Two different names for God are used throughout, in combination with a repetitive style and some features that seem to clash with each other. So much for the zoom lens. But when the text is viewed with a wide-angle lens, symmetries are noticed to which the interpreter with a zoom lens is completely oblivious. Using a wide-angle lens, Wenham (1978) and Anderson (1978) independently see an intricately designed chiasm (mirror structure) in the flood narrative, which highlights the central theme of God's grace to Noah.

Scholars have shown that this is the case not only with certain passages such as the flood narrative, but also with individual books within the Bible as well as sequences of books. Clines's (1978) groundbreaking work on the Pentateuch is one such study. Lamenting atomistic exegesis that cannot see the forest for the trees, he shows how the Pentateuch is bound together by a tripartite promise of God to Abraham: land, descendants and relationship. The different books treat the aspects of the one promise variously. Genesis stresses descendants; Exodus and Leviticus the relationship with God; and Numbers and Deuteronomy mainly land (Clines 1978: 45–60).

As well as factors already mentioned, the zoom-lens features probably resulted from an overemphasis on philology and history, which led to conclusions about the final editors of the Scriptures; namely that they could not make any sense of the text they were writing, as they simply acted as mechanical tradents. Again, Alter writes:

... biblical critics frequently assume, out of some dim preconception about the transmission of texts in primitive cultures, that the redactors were in the grip of a kind of a manic tribal compulsion, driven again and again to include units of traditional material that made no connective sense, for reasons they themselves could not have explained (1981: 20).

If the scholar was not committed to such a theory, he or she believed that an inconsistency might well be the result of a human mistake such as 'nodding off'. While this is always a possibility, in some cases

DOMINION AND DYNASTY

this is not just sleeping on the job – this is someone who is ‘out for the count’!²⁹ Alter’s perceptive literary studies of the Bible prove his point that if biblical scholars would widen the angle of their vision they might see something that astounds them:

The biblical text may not be the whole cloth imagined by pre-modern Judeo-Christian tradition, but the confused textual patchwork that scholarship has found to displace such earlier views may prove upon further scrutiny to be purposeful pattern (1981: 133).³⁰

Or again, to mix the metaphor, while biblical scholars seek to unscramble the textual omelette, they fail to see that it is a ‘very well-made omelette indeed’ (Alter 1987: 25). Josipovici (1988: xii), another literary scholar who has studied the Bible, agrees. With probing questions he sums up Alter’s point, not just with respect to the many individual texts, but also to the Bible as a Text: ‘Is the Bible the repository of some marvellous stories and poems, or is it a whole, perhaps a narrative or poetic whole? Is it, in short, a book, or a ragbag?’

It is the thesis of this book that, when the Hebrew Bible is read and reread (that is, viewed with a wide-angle lens), the faces of the biblical Rushmore – ‘the purposeful pattern’ – will be seen clearly, rather than the ‘textual patchwork’ in the face of the mountain. To employ Alter’s and Josipovici’s images, it will be seen as a book and not as a ragbag, ‘a well-made omelette indeed’. As Alter acknowledges, the premodern tradition was better able to see the pattern because it assumed that the text was an interconnected unity rather than a collage of diverse documents.

Explicit signals of textual coherence

In addition, there is mounting evidence that points in the direction of a canon-consciousness of the biblical authors/editors, that is, an awareness that the individual books of the Bible belonged to a larger whole. This was particularly true in the exile and post-exilic period of ancient Israel. Lohfink’s comments are to the point: ‘Those who com-

²⁹ Alter 1981: 148. Alter cites Gros Louis’s comments about the juxtaposition of the ‘contradictory’ accounts of the dual presentation of David in 1 Sam. 16 and 17.

³⁰ See also the important observations by Cassuto (1973: 1–6) as early as 1947.

A LITERARY APPROACH TO OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

posed and used the canon never regarded the individual books in the philosophical sense as books, that is, as bodies of meaning, complete in themselves. In this sense they only regarded the canon as a whole as a book' (1965: 35). From the earliest attested extrabiblical materials that reflect on the Bible, the biblical books are viewed as part of a whole – a Book. Although the word 'Bible' comes from the Greek *ta biblia* and literally means 'the books', it is clear that these books are part of a unity – a Book. The first time this expression, 'the books', is used to refer to the Old Testament is in the *Letter of Aristeas* (250–150 BC), the purpose of which was to explain and justify the translation of these divinely inspired books and no others into the Greek language, for use in the library of Alexandria (*Letter of Aristeas* 316). It is clear from other texts as well that the diversity of books is seen to reflect a conceptual unity of the words of a divine author, even though the publication of one complete volume of all such words, a Book in the modern sense, was technologically impossible (S. G. Dempster 2001: 23–45).³¹ Scrolls, as has been mentioned earlier, were not large enough to contain more than one of many of the biblical books, and the codex had not yet been invented (Haran 1993).

This historical point, of course, is due to the theological premise that the books were believed to be a conceptual unity because behind the many human authors stood a single author, God. In a classical exposition of this concept Josephus explains to his Greek audience that the reason the Jews do not have a multiplicity of books that contradict one another, but only twenty-two in which is found no disharmony, is that they come from a single divine author: 'For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us disagreeing from and contradicting one another, but only twenty-two that contain the records of all the past times, which are justly believed to be divine' (*Contra Apion* 1.8). Indeed, the many texts were understood to be one Text, sometimes simply called 'the Scriptures', 'the Scripture', 'the Torah', 'the Book of the Covenant', or even 'the Book of God'.³²

As mentioned earlier, within the biblical text itself there was an awareness that the many books were a unity. There is an exceedingly rich intertextuality in which there are many linguistic and conceptual echoes throughout Scripture. Later biblical books consciously echo

³¹ Although the evidence here points to a tripartite canon, it is clear that this material assumes a canon – a group of books viewed as a conceptual unity because divinely inspired.

³² For a complete list of such designations see Beckwith 1984: 105–109.

DOMINION AND DYNASTY

and imitate events, concepts and language found in earlier books (Fishbane 1989). Creation, exile and (occasionally) return form a recurring pattern that is stitched into the biblical narrative fabric. At the beginning, there is the creation of Adam and Eve, the placing of them in the Garden of Eden and the judgment of exile and death. Cain is soon born, and experiences the judgment of exile for the murder of his brother. The growth of the nations into a great power leads to sin at Babel and to exile as they are condemned to be dispersed throughout the earth. Abram is called into being to go to a land, which he leaves at times because of a lack of faith, only to return later. His descendants experience exile in Egypt and are brought back to the land. Their descendants also undergo exile before returning. Frequently the return is described in terms that echo the original creation and the placing of the first human pair in the Garden of Eden. Creation language often is employed to signal the return.

But this typological patterning occurs not only with such major motifs but with minor details as well. The story of the rape of the Levite's concubine at the end of the book of Judges echoes the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and the attempted gang rape of the angels visiting Lot.³³ The canonically aware reader makes the 'connection': at the end of the period of the judges Israel has become Sodom.³⁴ If there is any doubt, Isaiah 'connects the dots' by addressing Israel in the following way: 'Hear the word of the LORD, O princes of Sodom; give ear to the Torah of our God, O people of Gomorrah' (1:10). Literary cohesion like this is highly unlikely in a textual 'ragbag'.³⁵

Moreover, the final compilers of the biblical text ensured that the text was to be understood as a unity.³⁶ There are not only major groupings of books, but editorial 'splices' that join major groupings of books with each other. Therefore, both theological and literary points are made simultaneously. For example, at the beginning of

³³ Gen. 19:4-5; Judg. 19:22.

³⁴ For example, Gunn (1987: 119), an exception among commentators, writes, 'Israelite Gibeah turns out to be the new Sodom.'

³⁵ Lohfink (1965: 85) argues convincingly that typology is not simply an artificial construct imposed on the biblical text but an inherent feature of the text itself. His penetrating study of Exod. 15 shows that *within this ancient poem itself* the anticipated conquest is seen as another expression of the escape through the Reed Sea. The walls of water are now represented by the Canaanites. They have become transfixed into walls of stone on either side of the conquering Israelites.

³⁶ For what follows, see S. G. Dempster 2001 for a citation of the relevant literature and general discussion.

A LITERARY APPROACH TO OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

each of the major sections of the Hebrew Bible there is an extraordinary emphasis on the word of God. The Bible begins with the word of God creating reality, and its first work is to create light, thus establishing the rhythm of the day and night (Gen. 1:3–5). The text proceeds to describe the first human beings and their residence in the garden of Eden, which is maintained only by organizing their lives around the word of God (Gen. 2:4–25). Joshua, which commences the second major grouping of biblical books, the Prophets, contains an exhortation requiring the new Israelite leader to meditate day and night on the Torah to ensure the success of Israel's conquest of Canaan, and so be enabled to enjoy the fruits of the new Eden (Josh. 1:8–9). Near the beginning of the third and last grouping of books, the Writings, Israelites are urged to meditate on the Torah day and night in order to find success and become like trees planted in a garden alongside streams of gushing water (Ps. 1:2–3). By these links, this writing is conceptually distinguished from other writings, since it is the Word of *God*. But it is also distinguished literarily, since an implicit unity has been marked explicitly: it is also *the Word* of God.

Is it any surprise that this text was understood to be a unity, from Genesis to Chronicles? It begins with a creation story of humanity in the garden of Eden, continues with their exile from this place of God's presence because of disobedience, and ends with a nation in exile as a result of disobedience yet called back to the province of Judah to engage in the task of temple reconstruction – the supreme symbol of God's presence. This temple is no ordinary temple either, as it has eschatological overtones, resulting in the restoration of Eden. The rivers of Eden will flow again, this time turning even the Dead Sea into a place of teeming life.³⁷

Relevant to this is an early text, preserved in the Talmud, that is concerned for the preservation of a correct order of the books in this Text. Various reasons are given for the order. The first five books are not mentioned because there was no dispute about their order. All kinds of reasons are given for the order of the subsequent books – reasons that seem to strike scholars as artificial:

Our Rabbis taught: 'The order of the Prophets is: Joshua and Judges, Samuel, and Kings, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Isaiah and the Twelve Minor Prophets. Let us examine this ... Isaiah was prior to Jeremiah and Ezekiel' ... Then why should not Isaiah

³⁷ Cf. Gen. 2:10–14; Ezek. 47:1–12; Joel 3:18 (MT 4:18); Zech. 14:8.

DOMINION AND DYNASTY

be placed first? Because the book of Kings ends with a record of destruction and Jeremiah speaks throughout of destruction and Ezekiel commences with destruction and ends with consolation and Isaiah is full of consolation; therefore we put destruction next to destruction and consolation next to consolation. 'The order of the Hagiographa is Ruth ...' (*Baba Bathra* 14b).

This text raises a lot of questions. One particularly important one is: why is this stress on order so important that it needs to be justified, even if perhaps artificially? Some, like Haran (1993), have argued that, because of the technological invention of the longer scroll, sequence and arrangement have now become important, for the obvious reason that they can now be made permanent. In other words, the *baraita* points to the creation of the order, which would have been irrelevant at an earlier time.³⁸ But it is far more likely that the longer scroll, as well as competing with early Christian and Jewish alternative arrangements, necessitated the articulation and preservation of an already established sequence that was in danger of being lost. The reasons for the order supply a rationale for the preservation, and, even though it may be artificial, it acts to preserve the order. It also points to a belief at an early time that the order was not arbitrary. The invention of the vowel points by the Masoretes may offer an analogy to this situation. This artificial system of signs did not create vowels; it simply preserved their pronunciation.³⁹

The inclusion of this unit of tradition in the Talmud probably indicates an awareness of other 'unofficial' orders that were competing for acceptance, and the need to preserve an official one. As already indicated, a particular sequence suggests hermeneutical significance. Chronological order is expected as natural by the commentary, so an alternative arrangement requires explanation. Even if that explanation seems artificial, the sequence suggests a meaning. As Sailhamer (1995: 214), citing Eisenstein, has shown, in studies of film the sequencing of frames in various orders produces different meanings

³⁸ In order for Haran's thesis to be valid, he must discount evidence for libraries or archives before AD 200. For other possible reasons see S. G. Dempster 2001: 51.

³⁹ The situation may have been similar to the matter of canon in the early Christian church. Did the church create its canon in response to Marcion, or did Marcion make the church explicitly articulate its already accepted implicit canon? For important studies on the canonization of the New Testament see the classic study by Campenhausen (1962) and the recent studies by Trobisch (1996) and Barton (1997).

A LITERARY APPROACH TO OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

because 'competent viewers always seek to understand the parts in the light of the whole' (1995: 214). Similarly, in the Bible, the juxtaposition of Kings and Jeremiah suggests an interpretation, since both books treat the disaster and judgment of the exile. The 'interpolation' of the story of Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38) within the Joseph story (Gen. 37 – 50) may jar readers, but it none the less constrains them to connect it somehow to the Joseph story. Different arrangements generate different meanings. On a larger scale, the interpretive implications of the different arrangements of the Hebrew Tanakh and the Christian Old Testament have been noted. For example, Sarna writes:

The conclusion of the Hebrew Scriptures with Chronicles makes a statement that the consummation of History involves the ideal of the Jewish people to its land, of the restoration of Jewish sovereignty and of spiritual renewal. The arrangement of what Christians call the 'Old Testament' so that it closes with the words of the prophet interprets the coming of Elijah and the 'great and awesome day of the Lord' in 3:23 as proleptic of the New Testament in which the role of John the Baptist and the advent of the Christian Messiah is pivotal (1987: 12).⁴⁰

Whether Christians were responsible for the 'Old Testament' arrangement or whether they adopted one from an already existing Jewish sequence, the differences between the two 'books' is significant and has been explored by a number of scholars.⁴¹ The oldest order was clearly that of the Hebrew canon, and there is strong evidence that this was the Bible of Jesus Christ (Beckwith 1984). It is this arrangement that will be used in this study in order to help determine its overall message.

⁴⁰ See also Frye (1983: 207).

⁴¹ It is likely that the arrangement used by Christians was the result of Christian influence, rather than there being a separate Alexandrian arrangement. All the Greek manuscripts of codices containing the Old Testament come from Christian sources. For further discussion see S. G. Dempster 2000: 126. Di Lella (1987: 452) detects a possible Septuagint order pre-dating the Christian arrangement in ben Sirach's discussion of the Old Testament canon in terms of the law, wisdom and prophecy. But, as I have argued (S. G. Dempster 2001: 24–25 n. 12), this sequence is probably due to the wisdom constraints of the literary context.

DOMINION AND DYNASTY

The present study: a literary approach and biblical theology

The question why a Christian scholar like me should not include the New Testament within his purview in such a study is important. Just as it is fruitful to look at a sequence of books independently of its larger literary context (e.g. the Torah), however, it surely is helpful for Christians to look at the Bible of their founder as it probably appeared to him. Too often Christians have let the New Testament dominate interpretation of the Old without first trying to engage the latter in any meaningful way. Bonhoeffer's advice needs to be heard once again: 'I don't think it is Christian to want to get to the New Testament too soon and too directly' (1959: 50). Moreover, I am certainly not trying to argue that this biblical theological study is superior to all that have gone before it. I simply hope to use what appears to me to be a natural means – the narrative framework of the text itself – to bring out of the biblical storeroom 'new treasures as well as old'. I trust that this study will aid others in gaining some understanding of the 'depths and riches' of this treasure-house so that they can enter in for themselves.

This Text is named the Tanakh by the synagogue, an acronym which points to the alleged unity of this material as well as of its three main subdivisions: the *Torah*, consisting of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy; the *Nevi'im* (the Prophets), comprising Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah and the Twelve; and the *Ketuvim* (the Writings), composed of Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles.

Many scholars have used a literary approach to interpret smaller units of texts; it has worked well for narrative (Josopovichi). But rarely has it been used at the Text level, probably for some of the reasons already mentioned. This is certainly an oversight, for it could be particularly helpful, since one of the main tasks of a literary approach is to try to ascertain the overall message or central theme of a Text; and this coincides with the main task of biblical theology, which is the description of the conceptual unity of the biblical text. A prime purpose of literary studies is to grasp the big literary picture through analysis of plot and theme, and the goal of biblical theology is to grasp the big theological picture through analysis of the theological views of the various biblical texts. Many scholars working in the area of biblical theology have given up on this task, due perhaps

A LITERARY APPROACH TO OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

to an admission that there is not one theology but many. But literary unity is rarely considered, perhaps due to the loss of the concept of a Book, which is also due to the loss of the concept of an Author. Perhaps, if it can be shown through literary means that this material has not only an implicit literary cohesion but an explicit unity as well, biblical theology may get a fresh hearing.

This is a point made by a biblical scholar who has shown the fruitfulness of a literary approach to the biblical text. Gitay (1980; 1981) has used some of the principles of classical rhetoric to elucidate biblical texts. Assuming that the authors of the biblical texts were interested in communicating, he argues that an understanding of the principles and strategies of communicators will aid biblical interpreters to understand texts – the products of communication. Recently he has asked the next logical question: why not apply these insights to understanding the Text of the Bible? In a programmatic article he suggests that there is just such a fruitful interface for biblical theology and literary analysis, but it is hindered by the failure in biblical theology to find a central theme, and by the propensity of scholars to look at the biblical literature through lenses that distort the data rather than faithfully reflect it.

Gitay (1996b) examines the book of Job as a test case in which he tries to hear all the voices of the text, but the method itself cries out for application to the Text of which Job comprises only a small part. This is the method that will be used in this study in examining some themes in the Old Testament.

Biblical theology, Tanakh structure and the emergence of a literary approach

As far as the structure of the Tanakh is concerned, many Christian Old Testament theologians do not see that it has any positive relevance for biblical theology. For example, Gunneweg (1978: 121) remarks that the Tanakh's hermeneutical lens highlights the Torah's interpretive priority, which in his view results in a 'legalistic understanding of the canon', as opposed to the more prophetic Christian view. Gunneweg represents a group of scholars who understand the Tanakh as providing a hermeneutical lens of law, with the negative stereotypes that often accompany it, seeing the Old Testament as a sort of dark background to the light-filled landscape of the New Testament (e.g. Bultmann 1963).

While acknowledging the priority of law, Clements (1978) has a

DOMINION AND DYNASTY

more constructive appraisal of the theology of the Old Testament, stressing that the promise explicit in the prophetic division is also very important. Moreover, he laments that the Bible is habitually examined as a collection of proof texts instead of as a sequence of three great literary wholes. These large textual units sketch a literary context that highlights the dual themes of law and promise. Jews have stressed the one theme, Christians the other (see also Zimmerli 1965).

Westermann (1982) takes the Tanakh's tripartite structure as the organizing principle for his Old Testament theology. The Torah stresses the deeds of God (the saving history), the Prophets the words of God, and the Writings the people's response. Westermann adamantly affirms the importance of this structure to unfold the meaning of the Old Testament: it is 'an objective starting point', and 'If one asks what the Old Testament says about God, this threefold structure shows the way' (Westermann 1982: 10).

A notable oversight in these views is the failure to view the Tanakh as one text and not just as three. Frequently, the third section of the canon, the Writings, is neglected, since it is seen to be more in harmony with Rabbinic Judaism than are the more 'New Testament friendly' Prophets.⁴² One scholar has made this implicit view explicit by stating that 'a Christian theology ... [may] never sanction the masoretic canon since this would virtually sever continuity with the New Testament'.⁴³ Whether a biblical theology implicitly or explicitly fails to reckon with the Tanakh structure, Rendtorff (1993: 55–56) concludes that Christian theologians rarely treat the Old Testament in its final Jewish form, even though this was very likely the Bible of Jesus and the early church.⁴⁴

A Jewish scholar, Friedman (1987a; 1995), has been one of the first to address this concern for the literary integrity of the Tanakh. He observes that biblical scholars trained in the minutiae of exegesis often miss the larger literary picture. Exegetes, often for practical reasons, look through a zoom lens at a few verses. In contrast, literary scholars look through a wide-angle lens to consider the intention of the biblical editors to assemble the various texts into *one literary*

⁴² Westermann (1982: 11) regards the wisdom writings of this section as 'having no place within this basic framework of an Old Testament theology' since they are mainly secular – at least originally.

⁴³ H. Gese, cited in Rendtorff (1993: 55). See also Gese 1981: 13–14.

⁴⁴ It is interesting that one of the most influential literary interpretations of the unity of the Bible in recent times is by Frye (1983). But he specifically works with a Christian ordering of the Old Testament as opposed to the Tanakh.

A LITERARY APPROACH TO OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

work. The Bible is not so much a library or an anthology but a text, with a beginning and an end, commencing with Eve in the Torah and ending with Esther in the Writings (1987a: 211–212, 219).

Freedman (1992; 1993) and Sailhamer (1995) have advanced the discussion significantly. Freedman argues that the Tanakh should be seen from the vantage point not only of three divisions, but also of two: a first half, consisting of a Primary History, the Torah and the Former Prophets (150,000 words), and a second half, consisting of the Latter Prophets and the Writings (150,000 words). The final product was the work of an editor or editorial team who left their perspective on the material, a first half largely consisting of judgment and tragedy, and a second half stressing blessing and hope.

Sailhamer has reached similar conclusions about the textual unity of the material, naming such an editor the ‘canonicler’ (1995: 239–252). This person provided a lucid perspective for viewing the material, stitching the major divisions of the biblical books with literary seams that emphasized the text’s authority, eschatology and importance as an object of study. The larger design of the Text and the sequence of the books within it are also important, since they provide the hermeneutical lens for the text. Since readers of a text always ‘seek to understand the parts in the light of the whole’ (1995: 214), preceding and succeeding content constrains meaning. Moreover, Sailhamer observes that the received Tanakh structure is in the form of a literary narrative that cuts across the neat tripartite divisions. The narrative frame gives literary cohesion to the biblical text, extending from Genesis to 2 Kings and resuming in the narrative sections in the second half of the Writings.

Childs also notes this important narrative frame for the biblical text, noting that the ‘story of faith was largely preserved in historical sequence (Genesis through Ezra) along with a variety of “commentary” (Psalms, Prophets, Wisdom)’ (1992: 97). Surprisingly, Childs does not deal with this feature in any depth, and in two other major studies (1979; 1985) he rarely considers the big picture of the Old Testament and the relationship between individual books and larger divisions (Brueggeman 1982: 5; Dempster 1997; Barr 1999: 395–400).

In a very different type of work, Miles (1996) wrestles with the significance of this narrative–commentary–narrative structure of the Tanakh for understanding the gradual revelation of the identity of God. In the immensely popular *God: A Biography*, Miles considers the narrative break at the end of Kings and the resumption of the narrative in the Writings. The structure seems to highlight the direct

DOMINION AND DYNASTY

address of God in the commentary (the Prophets), and God seems to speak less and less as the Tanakh winds down. God and his speech seem like a spent force. There is nothing more to say.

From the structure of the Tanakh alone, this conclusion is controversial. One could equally argue that, structurally, the centre of the Tanakh *highlights* the importance of the divine speech. It is central. Moreover, with the resumption of the narrative in Daniel, one would be led to expect that, in the future, divine speech and divine action would be the norm, not the exception.⁴⁵

Finally, Sweeney (1997), in a programmatic article that sketches a framework for a distinctive Jewish biblical theology, has discussed some of the differences between the canonical arrangements of the Christian Old Testament and Hebrew Tanakh. He shows that the Christian arrangement with the Classical Prophets at the end accentuates eschatology, while the Tanakh's structure emphasizes ethics. The conclusion of the Tanakh with 'the restored Jewish community represents the potential for the implementation of the Mosaic ideal as represented in the Torah' (1997: 371). The Tanakh signifies completion while the Old Testament anticipates fulfilment.

While Sweeney has clearly made significant progress in discussing these different arrangements, some of his conclusions are questionable. For example, the simple contrast between eschatology and ethics, while helpful, is more complex than it first appears (S. G. Dempster 1997: Part 2). But the major importance of this work demonstrates that the macrostructure of the Tanakh has important implications for biblical theology.⁴⁶

As mentioned above, it is interesting that a number of outstanding literary critics in English studies have recently examined the Bible, stressing its importance as one literary unit. This may have stimulated some of the contributions of biblical scholars. Probably Frye's *The Great Code* (1983) has been the most influential. Frye analyses the complete Christian Bible and argues that it is a text in its own right,

⁴⁵ It is precarious to draw such conclusions. If God does not appear to be active in Esther, he does not appear to be active in Gen. 37 – 50 and the Succession Narrative (2 Sam. 9 – 20; 1 Kgs. 1 – 2).

⁴⁶ Barr (1999: 307–309) questions Sweeney's whole approach, observing that this concern with the interpretive significance of the canonical arrangement of books has been totally ignored in the history of interpretation. But one can legitimately respond by asking why this has been so. For most people of certain particular interpretive traditions, it has become second nature to think of the closing of the Old Testament with Malachi's prophecy about Elijah, or of Cyrus's edict. They simply think in those categories without reflecting on their significance.

A LITERARY APPROACH TO OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

whose basic structure, from creation to Apocalypse, has shaped western culture and thought. House has observed that *The Great Code's* 'greatest contribution to Old Testament literary criticism is its insistence that the Bible is a book, and as a book has meaning as a whole that cannot be grasped if an interpreter ignores this point' (1992: 17).

Canonization and contextualization

To be sure, there is strong resistance to this view. It violates the canons of much of contemporary scholarship, which has maintained that the biblical canon is an historical accident, composed of many contradictory voices. This has been a theme in Barr's writings, ever since Childs first made his proposal to use the canon as the domain of exegetical investigation:

An exegesis which would work strictly within the confines of the canon is certainly a possibility that could be added to other forms of exegesis, but it is doubtful how it could be the basic theological form of exegesis. And Childs' argument in favor of the final text, while an important consideration for the interpretation of individual books, like Genesis, or even the Pentateuch, or Matthew, does not thereby validate an extension to the point where the canon of the entire Scripture would define it as if it was a single text (Barr 1976: 110–111).⁴⁷

For how could this be, argues Barr (1983: 57), when the idea of a single text for the canon would have been unthinkable in biblical times because of some of the technological limitations already considered? But canonization *does* make one text out of many. As Gamble remarks:

In the nature of the case, canonization entails a recontextualization of the documents incorporated into the canon. They are abstracted from both their generative and traditional settings and redeployed as parts of a new literary whole;

⁴⁷ Note Barr's earlier comments (1976: 109) about the loss of a concept of biblical unity among scholars. He cites the telling comments by Käsemann: 'The NT as we have it is a fragmentary collection of documents from the earliest period, while the bulk of the material has vanished for ever. By and large there is no internal coherence. The tensions everywhere evident amount to contradictions.'

DOMINION AND DYNASTY

henceforth they are read in terms of this collection. In this way their historically secondary context becomes their hermeneutically primary context ... More important still, the canon creates a presumption of unity and coherence among its contents and inevitably encourages a synoptic reading of them. Thus the canon operates to refocus the meaning of individual documents, as each is read with a view to others and in the light of the collection as a whole (1985: 75).

Although, historically, the Gospels may be the last documents to have been produced in the New Testament, they have a hermeneutical and theological priority by virtue of their initial position in the canon. This priority also produces a cleavage between two books that originally formed a literary unity, Luke-Acts. Similarly, in the Hebrew Bible the decision to place the chronologically earlier Chronicles after the later Ezra-Nehemiah creates not only canonical cohesion but also an eschatological ending. Positioning the Writing Prophets after the Former Prophets instead of at the end of the canon changes the way the latter are to be understood. They are a prophetic history, the outworking of the divine word within history.

Furthermore, there are significant theological implications for all the books. There is a presumption of unity; the reader approaches the text with a hermeneutic of charity rather than of suspicion.⁴⁸ Consequently, the celebration of human sexuality in the Song of Songs should not be understood apart from the general context of human sexuality in the canon. Similarly, Job may challenge conventional wisdom but may not ironically repudiate the biblical God.⁴⁹ This simply means that, just as an individual book within the canon can be read as a text with a beginning, a body and a conclusion, with the various parts related to the whole and *vice versa*, so the canon should be read in the same way.

This means that the overall design of the Tanakh provides a hermeneutical lens through which its content can be viewed. Canoniza-

⁴⁸ See Halbertal (1997: 27–32) for a further development of these hermeneutical implications for canonical texts.

⁴⁹ See for example the work of Robertson (1973: 468), who argues that the Joban author ironically mocks God. Kugel (1981: 228) rightly characterizes this interpretation as absurd but with insufficient awareness that it is the canonical context of the book that nullifies Robertson's approach. The latter's approach interprets the book of Job not only independently of its canonical context but also shorn of its introduction and conclusion. One gets the impression that the book of Job is being forced on to a Procrustean hermeneutical bed.

A LITERARY APPROACH TO OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

tion provides a literary context for all the texts, creating one Text from many. The fact that the Hebrew canon is structured in terms of a narrative sequence with commentary means that canonization does not 'flatten' the text into a one-dimensional uniformity; rather, it provides for evolution, diversity and growth within an overarching framework in which the various parts can be related to the literary whole.

This literary/theological approach has much promise, since, if it is the case that the Hebrew canon is also a Text with a definite beginning, middle, ending and plot, then the task of discovering a fundamental theme becomes not an exercise in futility but an imperative of responsible hermeneutics.

Although Gerhard von Rad, the great Old Testament theologian, had a very different understanding of the Bible as a literary document from many of the individuals mentioned in this discussion, with his concern for units of tradition and their growth and reshaping, he never did lose sight of the big picture. In a remarkable statement toward the end of his *Old Testament Theology*, he writes:

The Old Testament is a history book; it tells of God's history with Israel, with the nations and with the world, from the creation of the world down to the last things, that it is to say, down to the time when dominion over the world is given to the Son of Man (Dan vii. 13f.). The history can be described as a saving history, because as it is presented, creation itself is understood as a saving act of God (1965: 357).

This book, whose plot-line stretches from the beginning to the 'latter days', from Adam to the son of man, is hardly a ragbag of literary relics. Rather, it is a remarkable Story that assimilates all its texts into its comprehensive framework. It begins at the beginning.